

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987  
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23  
South Carolina

Topography 5

131 river island rather than a saltwater ocean island.<sup>3</sup> The islands just off  
[103] the coast of Charleston include James, Johns, Wadmalaw, Edisto, and  
Yonges, among many others. The Sea Islands of Georgia extend on the  
northern coast from Harris Neck; on the southern coast they include  
Sapelo, Darien, St. Simons, and St. Marys.

133 The Sea Islands and surrounding areas were a mere submerged  
portion of the continental shelf during the early geologic history of  
North America. As time passed, the ocean retreated to its present posi-  
tion, and the low flatlands left behind became known as the Georgia  
and Carolina low country.<sup>4</sup>

132 The Sea Islands are tranquil, flat, swampy lands with elevations  
ranging from near sea level to slightly over 100 feet. The climate is  
generally mild throughout the year, with very few recordings of dras-  
tically low temperatures. The coastal areas are characterized by  
slightly higher annual temperatures than other areas, primarily because  
of their proximity to the ocean.<sup>5</sup> The climatogram shown in Figure 1  
illustrates the changes at various times of the year.

133 The Sea Island area is characterized by deep rivers snaking along  
the coast and dividing the land into countless large and small islands.  
134 The sandy soil, which drains inadequately, places economic and devel-  
[49] opmental constraints on the area. Road building is extremely difficult  
in spots; some islands still have no paved roads. The 1979 regional  
134 housing market analysis for the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester  
• 179 (BCD) Council of Governments estimated that 90 percent of the land  
311 area within Charleston County, which includes many of the Carolina  
Sea Islands, is composed of soils that put moderate to severe limita-  
tions on land use for urban development. The soil has poor load-  
bearing capacities, in addition to the prevailing poor drainage. Thus,  
financing for development must include provisions for land improve-  
ment as well as adequate drainage systems. Of the 2,614 square miles  
of land within the BCD region, only 5 percent has been developed for  
urban use; remaining portions of the coastal region are primarily rural.<sup>6</sup>

133 Slightly more than half of the area is forest and woodlands. The marsh  
137 and swamplands, nearly a quarter of the total, grow little but marsh  
weeds, owing to the ebb and flow of daily tidal waters. These lands are  
flat and dangerous; there are reports of unfortunate islanders' being  
caught in "suckholes" or "mashmud" and never returning. The overall  
[311] pattern of land use is summarized in Table 1.

491 Few bridges, with the exception of wooden crossings, connected

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Topography 7

Table 1. Land Use for BCD Region

| Category                                              | Acres     | % of Total |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Developed areas                                       |           |            |
| Urban uses                                            | 75,000    | 4.29       |
| Residential                                           | 21,000    | 1.20       |
| Commercial                                            | 3,500     | 0.20       |
| Industrial                                            | 12,600    | 0.72       |
| Public and other                                      | 37,900    | 2.17       |
| Agricultural uses                                     |           |            |
| Cropland and pasture                                  | 178,800   | 10.23      |
| Forest and woodlands<br>(excluding swampland forests) | 861,740   | 49.30      |
| Undeveloped areas                                     |           |            |
| Marsh and swampland                                   | 416,600   | 23.83      |
| Inland waterways                                      | 140,800   | 8.06       |
| Total                                                 | 1,747,940 | 100.00     |

Source: BCD Council of Governments, *Regional Housing Market Analysis*, 1975, p. 5; figuring corrected.

the islands to the mainland before 1940. Though considerable sums of money have been expended within recent years on the construction of long, narrow bridges to span the Atlantic coast, ocean recesses, rivers, and streams, the more remote islands, such as Sandy and Daufuski, continue to be inaccessible except by boat.<sup>7</sup> Most of the Sea Islands remain very sparsely settled despite the population growth brought on by recent industrialization and commercialization. The landscape is pastoral and mysterious compared to inland areas of the United States. Most islands are characterized by graceful palmetto trees, expansive green terrain, and atmospheric haze. The landscape in fact bears a striking resemblance to the topography of such coastal countries as Nigeria, Ghana, Angola, and Liberia, the tropical homelands of the Sea Islanders' ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

Electricity came to the more remote islands only as recently as the 1960s. Streetlights rarely line the narrow roadways of even the more developed islands, and in late evening the overhanging trees give the roads a ghostly allure. After nightfall it is literally impossible to see even two feet ahead.<sup>9</sup>

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10 The Social History and Organization

162  
(175) tained 30,922 whites and 71,868 blacks. By 1940 the Sea Island communities still maintained a majority black population. The 1940 census for Johns Island, South Carolina, revealed that of the 3,534 residents of the island, 2,623 were black. On Wadmalaw Island, where many of the data for this study were collected, only 251 of the 1,607 inhabitants in 1940 were white. The black-to-white ratio of Charleston County and the surrounding Sea Islands remained fairly stable until the late 1930s and the 1940s. The BCD Council of Governments records that between 1930 and 1970 Charleston County witnessed a 145% population increase, with further increments of approximately 4,200 persons per year between 1970 and 1978. This population growth is largely attributed to the increasing industrialization and commercialization brought by the new bridges connecting many of the islands to the coast. Most of the immigration since 1930 has been by whites. The 1970 census indicated that blacks constituted only 31.4 percent of the population of Charleston County, compared to more than 50 percent in 1930.<sup>15</sup>

161 While this distribution does reflect a major change in racial composition, especially in the Charleston County area during the last 100 or more years, the demographic picture of the Sea Islands is somewhat obscured by the distribution of the new arrivals. Only a few of the Sea Islands have experienced major changes in population and industrialization, and these are not among the most remote and economically distressed areas. Unemployment and population lag seem to be related to remoteness: islands with adequate bridges and paved roadways that provide excellent access to and from the Charleston area, like James and Johns in South Carolina, are undergoing significant population growth, as is shown in Table 2.

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179 The population growth for the Johns Island Division is due to major commercialization and to developmental pressures from the exclusive resort construction still occurring on Kiawah and Seabrook Islands, which are a part of the division (see Appendix 4). James Island, situated just over the bridge from Charleston, is highly urbanized and is one of the major arteries to the Folly Beach area. The new inhabitants in both island divisions, as elsewhere, are primarily white. Whereas blacks constituted approximately 80 percent of the total population of the Johns Island township in 1940, only 41 percent of the island residents were black in 1970, and that ratio remained relatively stable through 1980.<sup>16</sup>

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162 As the data in Table 2 indicate, Wadmalaw and Edisto, com-  
A, [For Appendix 4, see Category 423, pp. 165-168--Analyst]

159 good deal. He founded the Committee on Better  
 (668) Racial Assurance (COBRA), a multi-issue commu-  
 nity organization in Charleston also serving the sea  
 islands. He has been chairman of the Charleston  
 County Democratic party. He ran for state senate  
 and received support in both the black and white  
 communities. He is the owner of WPAL, a vital  
 radio station in Charleston that consistently ad-  
 dresses social issues as well as responds to the mu-  
 sical tastes of the community. He was the principal  
 mediator in the major civil rights campaign of the  
 Charleston area—a strike of hospital workers in  
 the late 1960s.

464 The job situation on Johns Island has im-  
 proved slightly. In the 1960s all young people who  
 finished high school left the area to find work.  
 (489) Now, with improved transportation, it is possible  
 (241) for them to work in Charleston and still live on the  
 (798) island. The resort developments and the new small  
 businesses offer some employment, but farming,  
 311 long a mainstay in the island economy, is steadily  
 433 declining. Farmland is now the prime target of de-  
 velopers. But the people who have stayed on Johns  
 Island have held onto a firm determination to live  
 in their traditional community, and many of their  
 hopes and dreams are still in place.

• 179 Development on Johns Island has taken two  
 179 forms. Tourist development, spreading rapidly all  
 along the coastal islands south of Washington,  
 D.C., is a threat to the indigenous population on  
 Johns Island. Kiawah and Seabrook, accessible  
 only by driving across Johns Island, are full-fledged  
 resort communities with condominiums, hotels  
 and inns, shops and boutiques, and large private  
 homes. Both are entered by passing through a se-  
 curity checkpoint. Viewed initially as offering some  
 economic and social benefits to island residents,  
 both have been disappointing, catering to wealthy  
 visitors from outside the region and offering only  
 menial and limited employment. Wadmalaw Is-  
 land, just across the Esau Jenkins Memorial Bridge  
 from Johns Island, is in the throws of plans for de-  
 velopment. An island committee made up of black  
 and white landowners has been meeting regularly  
 to design their own development plan that may

(P xiii 78)

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177 counter those of outside interests. The County Commission accepted this new plan for limited and controlled development in early 1988, but the island residents know they must be constantly vigilant to ensure its success.

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[743] But another kind of development is here as well. In the 1970s a comprehensive community organization was put in place to address health needs on the island. Beginning first with a small clinic as part of Rural Missions, Inc., a local community improvement association, it grew to include environmental health, housing for the elderly, nutrition, and programs for substance abuse, as well as the development of a full-scale medical clinic and a nursing home. The Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corporation is a crucial factor in the present and the future of five sea islands—Johns, James, Wadmalaw, Edisto, and Yorges—and in many ways is a direct outgrowth of the story Esau Jenkins recounts earlier in this book. The Health Care Corporation is also a landowner, but it has utilized the land for the benefit of the indigenous community rather than for wealthy newcomers. It's a model worth looking at.

423 One of the greatest pressures on Johns Island is land ownership. As the chain of sea islands becomes increasingly valuable for tourist development, the patterns of passing property down through families and the need to know about land and tax laws become crucial to the survival of the community. People on Johns Island are now well aware of the value of their land and are coming together to plan their futures. Further down the coast, on St. Helena Island, Penn Community Center has sponsored a program to guard against the loss of land by blacks. The center's director, Emory Campbell, having seen his home community of Hilton Head undergo drastic change in the 1950s, is an eloquent speaker for the protection of the land for traditional communities. He and a co-worker, Joe McDormick, have come to Johns Island to participate in workshops on land issues.

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[583] As in 1965, education is still a major concern on Johns Island. Esau told of the struggle to get a black high school on the island. In the late 1960s  
(P. XIV-A)

*Mr. William Saunders*

**WHAT I TALK TO PEOPLE ON THE ISLAND  
ABOUT IS POOLING OUR RESOURCES**

177

There's no way that the island can stay unchanged. It's already changed. There was a time when I knew everybody on the island. I can't say that anymore. There's been such an influx of new people in the last ten years. There's a real new sense of direction there. The new people can always take advantage of the older people. Hopefully, we can control some of the change.

For the first time in my lifetime, the white and black communities have come together. Some of the whites who hated my guts back when you guys were there now are using me sometimes as spokesman to the county government. Some of them who would never have spoken to me, I've been in meetings with them and they'll say, "Let Mr. Saunders explain that." There's a Johns Island planning committee to look at what needs to be changed. I think we might be able to maintain our roads—if we could get some cutoffs on the roads, where those big farm vehicles or the school bus can pull over for the traffic—and if we can do it and save the big trees.

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I wish I was in a position to get a group of people together to buy up a good bit of the land that is for sale on Johns Island. Some of it I would like to just sit. Some of it you could build the things that need to be done. I would like to see a nice Holiday Inn-type motel over there. There are so many people from the island that are living away from here that come home and their family don't have a house large enough for them to stay in. And they don't want to stay in the city, so they just crowd in together. But if you had a real nice hotel and just a nice restaurant, you could make money on it. There are so many things that could be done.

What I talk to people on the island about is pooling our resources to build the things that will be built on Johns Island. It can be done, but we would have to trust each other.